

Kewaunee hopes to acquire landmark lighthouse



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The lighthouse in Kewaunee is a popular tourist attraction, and now the city has a chance to acquire the landmark and open it to the public. Robert Witkowski of Kewaunee fishes nearby in 2006.

Coast Guard no longer has use for building; public tours a possibility

By Meg Jones of the Journal Sentinel

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Like a string of pearls circling Lake Michigan, lighthouses have been shining beacons of safety to untold Great Lakes mariners. Situated on the edge of Wisconsin's thumb, Kewaunee's lighthouse has guided boaters and ship captains for more than a century. Now, it's for sale.

Well, actually, the federal government is giving it away. But you have to be a nonprofit organization, state or local agency, educational group or community development organization to get it. And it must be maintained and used for educational purposes, such as a museum. The City of Kewaunee wants the building and not just because it's a tourist attraction that still sports its original fifth-order Fresnel lens. "It's the focal point of the harbor," said Ald. Jeff Vollenweider, chairman of the city's recently formed Lighthouse Preservation Committee. "It's kind of a trademark."

Kewaunee officials submitted a letter of interest and will fill out a lengthy application this summer. The idea is to open the structure for tours and promote preservation of lighthouses, said Ald. Jamie Sperber, director of the Kewaunee Chamber of Commerce. Though visitors can walk up to the lighthouse, it's not now open to the public.

In a money-saving move, the U.S. Coast Guard no longer wants the building, though the agency plans to keep the navigational aid in operation, said Terry Pepper, executive director of the Great Lakes Lighthouse Keepers Association.

"They want to keep the lights operating, (but) they can't afford to maintain the buildings," said Pepper, whose nonprofit lighthouse preservation society is based in Mackinaw City, Mich.

The Coast Guard has been shedding ownership of lighthouses much of this decade, spurred by the 2000 National Lighthouse Historic Preservation Act, which allows the agency to turn over the historic buildings to the U.S. National Park Service and publish their availability.

Though most are acquired by nonprofit groups that must restore and maintain them under federal guidance, lighthouses that garner no interest are eventually auctioned. Prices have ranged from \$2,000 to \$500,000.

In technology's shadow

Lighthouses may be quaint, photogenic and cool to look at. What they're not is a necessity.

In an age of global positioning systems, radar, cell phones, digital navigation charts and other devices that keep boaters safe, lighthouses are not as critical as they were back when the Great Lakes were, in effect, an interstate road system moving cargo and people from one place to another.

They're still a well-used navigational aid, but if the Coast Guard is installing a new light on water, the government is not going to build a house. Instead, a fairly ugly, steel skeletal structure with a light on top is built - something that gets the job done but is not likely to be pictured on a postcard.

After the Erie Canal opened in 1821, commerce on the Great Lakes took off, which was followed by numerous shipwrecks at a time when there were few or no navigation charts.

Lighthouses began popping up like mushrooms along the shores to either warn mariners of something dangerous, such as shoals, or lead them to something - in the case of Kewaunee, the piers in the community's harbor.

In the mid-1800s, Kewaunee improved its harbor in an unsuccessful bid to become a big port city on Lake Michigan. A pair of range lights

were installed on a pier in 1891, designed to be visible for 15 miles, according to a history of Kewaunee's lighthouse published by Pepper. Over the years, the structure expanded and changed until it became the lighthouse that thousands of people armed with cameras walk out to see each year.

Pepper, whose group has taken over two lighthouses in Michigan, said Kewaunee's building is fairly large and could easily be turned into a museum. But he cautioned that it's not cheap to own one. His association has poured almost \$2 million into the St. Helena Island lighthouse and \$300,000 to restore a lighthouse near Cheboygan.

11 available this year

This year, 11 lighthouses are available on the Coast Guard's list, including the Kewaunee Pierhead Lighthouse and the Manitowoc Breakhead Lighthouse, as well as ones in Puerto Rico, New Jersey and Massachusetts. Last year, a dozen lighthouses were available.

It usually takes eight months to a year to transfer ownership of a lighthouse, with the Coast Guard acquiring an easement to service the light, said Arthur Ullenberg, a realty specialist for the U.S. General Services Administration, the federal government's landlord.

The lighthouses are not appraised for sale because they're such special properties. But almost all that eventually are put up for sale at auction get sold.

In the meantime, Kewaunee officials are conducting an informal survey of visitors to their lighthouse.

"The lighthouse is a major tourist attraction here," Sperber said. "If somebody can get that open, that would be great."